

DAILY INTERLAKE

Kalispell MT 59904

Daily

APR 17 2003

Superior Clipping Service

Glendive MT 406-377-6612

40

EPA official: Forget emergency

Special to the Inter Lake

LIBBY — A declaration of a public health emergency isn't the answer to Libby's asbestos-related problems, federal officials are telling the community.

In a recent letter after an inquiry from the Community Advisory Group, EPA assistant administrator Marianne Horinko pointed out several ways the federal government has already provided money for health care in Libby.

She pointed to funding for upgrades at the local hospital, the Center for Asbestos Related Disease and the Lincoln County Community Health Center, along with a grant to the school district to develop a database of former students

who may have been exposed to asbestos-contaminated vermiculite.

Horinko said the EPA has never declared a public health emergency in the 23 years the provision has been part of Superfund legislation.

She indicated no such declaration will be made for Libby.

The Superfund law contains a provision for the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to provide medical care and testing in cases of public health emergencies.

Declaring an emergency was seen by some in Libby as a way of ensuring federal health-care funding for people exposed to the asbestos that contaminated vermiculite mined and processed at Libby for more than 60 years.

Horinko's letter was discussed at last Thursday's advisory group

meeting.

Even if the agency were to declare a public health emergency, it would be ATSDR's responsibility to provide health care, EPA toxicologist Aubrey Miller said.

"ATSDR is saying even if we did it, we don't know what to do with it," Miller said. "There's not any money for it, and it's never been done before."

It would take congressional action to fund health care for Libby asbestos victims, Miller said.

"It still is going to go back to Congress," Miller said. "It's going to take an act of Congress to fill the coffers."

ATSDR representative Dan Strausbaugh read a statement making it clear his agency won't declare an emergency.

The screening program conducted by his agency in Libby is "consistent with ATSDR's statutory authorities," Strausbaugh said. His agency does not have the resources and is not authorized to provide health-care services to communities, he said.

Libby will continue to be one of the most important public health sites for his agency, Strausbaugh said. The agency can conduct all necessary work in Libby without declaring a public health emergency, he said.

"The public health agencies will continue to work with EPA, other federal and state agencies, and the community to prevent exposure to asbestos and protect the health of current and future Libby residents," Strausbaugh said.